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Barriers to Participation in Extension Expanded Foods and Nutrition Programs

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Barriers to Participation in Extension Expanded Foods and Nutrition Programs

Abstract

Barriers to participation in Extension programs often influence the means of program delivery and approaches to developing educational programs. A study of Expanded Foods and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) clientele in one of North Carolina's poorer rural counties accentuates the difficulties faced by these limited resource clientele in their participation in the EFNEP program, as well as challenges to Extension to recognize and overcome such barriers. The research found that essentially all of this limited resource audience expressed some level of barriers. These included logistical, social, situational, and emotional barriers.

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Introduction

The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) is a Cooperative Extension program that operates in all 50 states and in American Samoa, Guam, Micronesia, Northern Marianas, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands (USDA, 2000). The objectives of EFNEP are to assist limited resource families and youth in acquiring the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and changed behavior necessary for nutritionally sound diets and to contribute to their personal development and the improvement of the total family diet and nutritional well-being.

The primary audiences of EFNEP programs are limited resource youth and limited resource families with young children. EFNEP participants receive educational information from trained paraprofessionals and volunteers, who give lessons on:

- Food safety,
- Choosing healthy foods,
- Meal planning,
- Food purchasing,
- Storage,
- Preparation, and
- Sanitation (USDA, 2000).

EFNEP has been a viable program of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service since 1969 (NCCES, 1992). Based on its stated objectives, the program was implemented in many of the state's poorer counties. As one of those poorer counties, Duplin consistently has over 25% of its nearly 50,000 population eligible for EFNEP programs.

The rate of adult illiteracy in Duplin County exceeds the state average by 33%. Traditional Extension delivery methods such as publications, newsletters, and newspaper articles have proven limited in reaching these low resource audiences. The county's large rural geographic area (814 square miles) and lack of public transportation restricts program delivery options, especially those that require travel to distant locations.

Another educational barrier that may influence the EFNEP programming is the number of working mothers in the county. There are nearly 6,000 mothers of small children working outside the home in the county. Of that number, there are 1,107 single working mothers in the county (Duplin County, 1994). If targeted clientele were to participate in traditional Extension programming delivery methods, such as night meetings, adequate and quality childcare generates another barrier. This creates an additional impact on the constraints of effective educational programming for these EFNEP audiences.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study reported here was to examine the educational barriers of EFNEP clientele in Duplin County, North Carolina. The study was designed to identify key variables of EFNEP program participants, including:

- Marital status,
- Age,
- Education level,
- Children in household,
- Age of children single, and
- Public assistance participation.

The study further sought to determine program participants' perceived barriers to adult education provided by the NCCES. The specific objective was to determine critical factors contributing to barriers of adult education among this specially targeted audience.

Barriers to Education

Although selection of appropriate delivery methods and content of educational programs influence how adults learn, there may be barriers to participation that may also affect desired educational outcomes. Several researchers have clustered reasons why adults do not participate into types of barriers. Johnstone and Rivera (1965) described 10 potential barriers that were clustered into two categories: external or situational barriers and internal and dispositional barriers. These barriers were then linked to different sex, age, and socioeconomic categories. Older adults cited more dispositional barriers, while younger people and women were more constrained by situational barriers. The researchers noted, "persons of lower socioeconomic circumstances face both kinds of obstacles" (p. 221).

Cross (1981), using data from the Commission on Nontraditional Study, grouped 24 nonparticipation items into three different categories of barriers. These were: situational barriers relating to a person's situation at a given time; institutional barriers consisting of "all those practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities"; and dispositional barriers arising from a person's attitude toward self and learning.

Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) cite another typology of barriers. They labeled barriers such as beliefs, values, attitudes, and perceptions about education or about oneself as a learner as "psychosocial." Darkenwald and Merriam have also added a fourth category, informational, which reflects the lack of awareness as to what educational opportunities are available.

Motivating a learner to change behavior can also be deterred by another barrier. That barrier may be defined as a level of self-esteem. An individual's need for self-esteem "motivates the individual for achievement, strength, confidence, independence, and freedom" (Petri, 1981).

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to examine the educational barriers of EFNEP clientele in Duplin County. The population used in the study was enrolled EFNEP program participants living throughout Duplin County, North Carolina. This population was determined utilizing monthly EFNEP clientele records totaling 114. A sample of 20 persons was selected from the total population of 114 by means of a randomized table.

Data collection procedures involved a field study including face-to-face interviews and a structured questionnaire instrument.

The questionnaire instrument was tested for validity with an independent population of three currently enrolled EFNEP program participants who were not chosen in the 20-person sample, professional Extension staff, and support staff. The responses of those reviewers indicated a need for slight changes in wording, choices, and other minor changes for clarity of the questionnaire. A list of barriers was established based on prior research and focus groups of program clientele.

Basic statistical techniques used were the descriptive statistics, i.e., means, standard deviations, and percentage distributions.

Findings

Table 1.
Characteristics of Respondents

	N	%
Marital Status		
Married	7	35
Single	11	55
Divorced	2	10
Total	20	100
Age		
Less than 20	1	5
20 to 29	8	40
30 or more	11	55
Total	20	100
Education level		
Less than 8 years	1	5
8-11 years	9	45
12 (high school graduate)	4	20
13 or more years	6	30
Total	20	100
Children in household		
Yes	18	90
No	2	10
Total	20	100

Age of Children		
0-4	8	26
5-9	13	44
10-15	9	30
Total	30	100
Employment status		
Employed	7	35
Unemployed	13	65
Total	20	100
Government assistance		
AFDC	8	
40		
Food Stamps	9	45
WIC	7	35
No assistance	9	45
Use of Extension information		
None	0	0
Little	2	10
Some	9	45
Much	2	10
Very Much	7	35
Total	20	100

Table 2.

EFNEP Respondents Perceiving Barriers Preventing Use of Extension Information

	N	%
Yes	1	5
No	0	0
Possibly	19	95
Total	20	100

Table 3.
Barriers to Participating and Using Extension Information by EFNEP Respondents

Barriers	Major		Minor		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Knowledge of information and educational programs available through NCCES	6	30	3	15	9	45
Family responsibilities will not allow me to leave home	7	35	9	45	16	80
Lack of equipment needed to receive information	1	5	3	15	4	20
The information is not what I needed	1	5	8	40	9	45
I don't have transportation	7	35	10	50	17	85
I have trouble reading the information	5	25	11	55	16	80
I don't feel comfortable in a group	3	15	5	25	8	40

In addition to the items listed in Table 3, three of the 20 respondents indicated that having no telephone contributed to circumstances preventing them from using Extension information.

Discussion and Conclusion

With 100% of the respondents indicating barriers to participation in Extension programs, there is little argument that educational programs must be prudently focused on the EFNEP audience to assure that information is delivered in ways that can overcome many of these barriers. Clearly, with 85% indicating transportation difficulties, there can be little question that educational programs must be taken directly to the participants that are logistically applicable to their needs, whether directly in the home or in the nearby community if the program requires direct personal interaction.

Otherwise, non face-to-face delivery means may be used, such as mass media or self-directed educational materials. These could include audio cassettes, video cassettes, learning modules, or printed materials as alternatives, although these alternatives could be less viable due to participants' poor reading skills, lack of equipment, or motivational distractions.

An analysis of the personal variables associated with the respondents indicates the overwhelming implication of situational variables, which the findings bore out. Also, the low educational attainment of most participants, as well as their low economic status, could influence self-esteem negatively and thereby explain why they indicated a lack of comfort in group settings. Indeed, the low education levels, high unemployment, and lack of economic status may all be contributors to low self esteem and its resulting behavioral influences. As Sorensen (1998) explained in her book on breaking the chain of low self-esteem,

Others slink back in fear, never realizing their skills or talents. In their insecurity, they are afraid to try new things and are frightened by the challenges they face, vulnerable to the possibility of failure and humiliation. While these people are often capable and bright, they do not recognize or utilize their skills because their motivation has been so repressed and their fear of failure is so great. . .

The study indicates that barriers frequently observed by EFNEP educators were substantiated by research conducted on a small sample and is an indicator of the need for further research on the subject of barriers and their geneses. Yet, in light of these findings, diligence on the part of the Extension educator in correctly assessing obvious or potential barriers to program participation can be a highly effective deterrent in preventing program dropouts. Indeed, such diligence and positive actions may stimulate self-esteem improvements, which can ultimately translate to enhancement of the quality of life of the program participants.

It must be recognized that barriers will always exist. The key is to recognize and deal with these barriers creatively and effectively.

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